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NECESSARY TACTIC

Secret Aid Has Purpose

Admiral Stansfield Turner's ability to direct the nation's intelligence agencies is only one of the considerations before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence as it begins to interrogate Turner.

By their questioning, members of the committee also will set the tone of national debate on exactly what the Central Intelligence Agency and the other groups are supposed to do.

Without detracting any luster from his stature and reputation, it is possible to say that Admiral Turner's vitae are probably of the least importance to the committee's efforts. We have little doubt that Admiral Turner will be confirmed in due course. However, whether the CIA that he and his successors run will serve the nation effectively may be determined by the direction that the Senate takes.

Until recently, the outlook for the CIA was improving. Its past excesses appeared to have been thoroughly ventilated and the shock effect of its illegal, and often high handed activities, seemed to be absorbed by the American people. Additionally, the executive and legislative branches have established sound oversight over the CIA.

Recent revelations that the CIA may have given money to a number of heads of state without the knowledge of several presidents are a serious setback.

President Carter reacted immediately, cutting off such aid arbitrarily as soon as he learned about it. And CIA critics, again emboldened, are stepping forward to insist on total

capitulation on the issue of whether the CIA should be permitted to conduct covert activities.

President Carter, who is allergic to any hint of immorality in foreign policy, reacted too hastily. Just the act of suspending covert financial assistance itself connotes that it is immoral, and undoubtedly a source of embarrassment to foreign leaders.

The larger question is whether the secret aid was indeed wrong. We don't want to dwell too much on the nature of the "real world." But it is a fact that all nations pay for information that assists their policies, and that making such payments openly might jeopardize a national interest, embarrass a friend or assist an enemy. British leaders knew of George Washington's plans because they bought information from Tories. Mainland China has the atomic bomb because it bought the information from an American. Undoubtedly the Soviet Union's major technological advances after World War II were materially assisted by the KGB. And even today, the United States is paying for the support of a former MIG-25 pilot because he is giving us valuable information. What's wrong if our information comes from a friendly head of state who would be compromised by overt assistance, provided the President and proper committees of Congress are aware of what is going on?

We believe the answer is "nothing," and that President Carter and Admiral Turner will be doing the United States a service if they say so emphatically in the days ahead.